Ethical Pimping

By M G Khan

I grew up in the 1980's in Balsall Heath, Birmingham; it was a well known and busy red-light district where kerb crawlers often left little room on the pavement. The exchanges taking place were obvious even the youngest amongst us and made us witnesses to the exploitation of lives that was visible in all the ways ours was not. Even to a child it was hard not to notice young women grow very old, very quickly, and all that was vulnerable and fragile giving way to survival and bare life. The traffic has slowed down somewhat since the prostitutes and the pimps were driven out but the lust for and trading on 'experience' has re-surfaced in different guises on the kerbs of our neighbourhoods, and with it, a new kind of pimp. A new type of go-between, extortionist and entrepreneur has emerged living off the exploitation of 'experience' and trading on its current hyper-inflated political and academic currency: the researcher.

Some will find this analogy between dissonant experiences and exploitations unpalatable or downright objectionable. Some may see it as merely metaphorical. But exploitation is exploitation, whether of another's body or experience. My assertion that research can become a form of pimping is not one that I make without experience or observation and by doing so I put myself under the same charge. As a former Youth Worker there were often and in recent years an increasing number of phone calls from consultation companies, research houses, 'think tanks', Government departments and researchers hoping I'll procure them 'ten Somalis', 'five Kashmiri vegetarians', or just generally 'your yoooth'. As an academic the demand to 'capture and analyse the Muslim experience' has never been greater. Articles, surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, charting and polling all aspects of Muslim life proliferate in a manner suggestive of the colonial survey groups of old charged with mapping terrain, territory and tradition. For the 'Aden survey group' of old read 'British Muslims' today.

It would, by the way, be a mistake to assume that these research 'visitors' are 'outsiders' (though I am never really sure who the insiders and outsiders in the Muslim community are); and though some within, as Muslims, struggle with this dilemma, others 'extract' and 'map' unperturbed. For what purposes? To whose benefit?

The question facing individuals in the research community, it seems to me, is simple: Pimp – is that who I am; am afraid of becoming; am asked to be; or need to be for a living. Rather than face it in this stark and unsparing form, the reflexive response of the researcher is a reiteration of the mantra of 'professional ethics', a cleansing formula that turns on the purge of the bad apples of methodological fault, failures in data collection or ethical transgression, rounded off with the benefits of empirical research of proper standards to avoid facing the deeper, more disturbing question. But this evasion can sometimes itself be a sign that pimping is exactly what is happening. Medicine and law, after all, are the professions with the most codified ethical standards, but doctors and lawyers are often also those from whom we are the most distant; it is with butchers and mechanics that we know exactly where we stand!

Focus and fixation on ethics can help to professionalise endeavours through process, ritual or ideology, which is also a distancing and separation; a justification for walking away because we have norms, guidelines, duties and obligations. Ethics not only legitimises research activity, it often underpins and justifies the process itself.

In community, research ethics can afford us a neat protective capsule; a vehicle that takes us in and safely and untouched brings us out again. It is an effective way of setting boundaries creating an 'us' and 'them'; helping us decide how close we should or 'can allow' ourselves to become, or how distant we must remain; whom we are allowed to speak to, and whom not. Others' experiences become data, and when they do, the focus shifts to the researcher and the data, rather than the researched who can no longer be trusted with it. This is one reason why Younis Alam's recent book, Made in Bradford (Pontefract: Route Books), is such a breath of fresh air: people were trusted with their experiences and he gives neither reason nor right to get in their way.

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